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SUBJECT: Hesse Social Democrats Weakened by Infighting as Internal Opposition to Agenda 2010 Grows

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Torn by increasing internal opposition to Agenda 2010 reforms and plagued by declining membership, Hesse Social Democrats have been unable to serve as an effective foil to the Christian Democrat (CDU) government of Minister-President Roland Koch. Smaller parties like the Free Democrats (FDP) and Greens have assumed de facto the opposition role. A failed attempt last month to corral left-wing elements of the party threatens to push the SPD further left and damage its viability as an alternative to Koch and the CDU. END SUMMARY.

Rebellious Hesse Social Democrats Draw Attention From Berlin

2. (SBU) Hesse Social Democrats face continued debate over the ideological direction the party will take to oppose Minister-President Koch in 2008 elections. Support within the party is split between left-leaning Hesse SPD leader Andrea Ypsilanti (a 2004 ConGen Frankfurt IV) and centrist Landtag caucus leader Juergen Walter. The battleground for this struggle has been the traditionally left-wing district of South Hesse (the Hesse SPD is organized in two districts with a weak state office). A July convention exposed the rift within the party as Hesse SPD Bundestag member Nina Hauer came from Berlin to support Walter's proposal to eliminate the SPD's two district authorities and consolidate power within the state office. After a heated debate, delegates defeated the initiative. Many in attendance rejected Walter's call for reform and instead interpreted the move (and centrist Hauer's attendance) as a power play against the leftist elements of the party. One delegate commented on the failure of the maneuver by noting "if Berlin has decided to send a proconsul to quiet down a rebellious SPD district, this is a powerful response."

Hesse SPD Critics of Agenda 2010 Oppose Party Reform

3. (SBU) In their conversations with consulate representatives, Social Democrat insiders echoed the observation that Walter's call for reform stems from a desire to solidify his power base within the party, noting that party reform itself is not the real issue. Even supporters of the present structure admit that it hinders the SPD's ability to campaign effectively. However, they claim it is inappropriate to start discussing organizational reform while the party is out of the ruling coalition. Furthermore, many party followers identify increasingly with the south Hesse wing's condemnation of Agenda 2010 and feel that the Hesse SPD platform should reflect this stance an unlikely proposition under the mooted reorganization.

4. (SBU) The party's internal strife has weakened the entire Hesse opposition. While Greens and FDP provide frequent and public criticism of the CDU administration, the infrequent SPD responses are often late. Hesse papers instead often point to Greens caucus chief Tarek Al Wazir as the "real" opposition leader. Although Walter is a strong speaker who can hold his own in parliamentary debate with Koch, divisions within the party prevent him from being truly effective. Financial constraints triggered by decreasing membership (the South Hesse district has lost more than twenty-five percent of its members since Koch took power in 1999) also limit the party's reach.

COMMENT

5. (SBU) Contacts tell Pol/Econ representatives that Walter and Hauer's political futures could be in danger as a result of their failed initiative. Party stalwarts have become increasingly uncomfortable with the centrist wing of the SPD

in the wake of public fallout from Schroeder's Agenda 2010 reforms, particularly Hartz IV (reftels). Hesse SPD caucus Social Affairs spokesman Stefan Schaefer-Guembel tells us the SPD will need to more openly address the "impoverishment of wide population groups" after Hartz IV goes into effect. Guembel's opinion reflects the genuine crisis of conscience many in the party are having about the centrist direction of the national SPD and Schroeder's program of reform. Ultimately, the party's prospects will depend on state chair Ypsilanti's ability to unify a rank-and-file increasingly unhappy with the Agenda 2010 process. END COMMENT.

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